

Trench Safety: An Employer Turns to OSHA for Help

Construction Contractor

A contractor constructing a rapid rail transit system was involved in trenching, excavating, and tunneling. He asked specifically for a consultation to help identify ways to protect workers in the trenching operations.

Unsloped, Unshored Trench Unsafe

The consultant arrived at the site the day after a heavy rain and found 12 to 18 inches of water in the 12-foot-deep trench. The trench walls were neither shored nor sloped in the 30-foot long trench. In addition, excavated material was piled within a foot of the edge of the 5-foot-wide trench. The consultant noted several cracks in the ground around the trench opening. Several employees already were working in the trench under these clearly hazardous conditions.

Workers Exit, Trench Collapses

The consultant immediately advised the job foreman and the company safety supervisor of the

imminent danger posed by the unsafe trench. He asked that the employees evacuate the trench right away. Following his recommendations, the employer promptly ordered all the workers out of the trench. Ten minutes later the sides of the trench gave way. Had any workers remained in the trench, they would have been buried by the heavy wet soil.

Recommendations

To protect workers involved in trenching operations, the consultant recommended the following measures: (1) shoring or sloping the sides of trenches, (2) providing a means of exit from the trench such as a ladder, (3) storing excavated and other materials at least 2 feet from the trench edge, (4) preventing the accumulation of water in a trench, (5) inspecting the trench daily for signs of potential collapse, and (6) training employees to work safely in a trench.

Results

The prompt response of the company to the consultant's advice probably saved several workers'

lives. The company followed the consultant's other recommendations as well, including sloping the trench. This consultation resulted in greater awareness of trenching safety through a clear-cut demonstration of its importance. [JSHQ](#)



Detach Here

SafeWorks provides a brief summary of the results of an employer's request for workplace safety and health assistance. Such assistance can identify and help the employer correct workplace hazards, develop or improve an effective safety and health management system, or both. Small business employers can receive this assistance, without cost, under a consultation program funded largely by OSHA and administered by state agencies and universities. Contact the OSHA office in your area for additional information on the consultation program.